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Top Suspect in Beirut Blast Emerges

*But Finding a Culpit
Leaves Open Question:
Should U.S. Retaliate?*

By DAVID IGNATIUS
And GERALD F. SEIB

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WASHINGTON — Pictures of Hussein Moussavi show a small, neatly dressed man with a dark beard that seems to overwhelm his face. He is a school teacher by profession and a man with a family problem. Friends say that he was driven from his village in eastern Lebanon nearly a decade ago after he killed one of his cousins in a quarrel.

Mr. Moussavi is emerging as the prime suspect in an unusual intelligence dragnet.

U.S. officials say they are nearing a firm judgment that he and his extremist Shiite Moslem supporters planned the bomb attacks against U.S. and French soldiers in Beirut last month—probably with help from Iran and Syria.

A Reagan administration official summarizes the investigation of the bombings this way:

"There are intelligence estimates that identify Moussavi and his group as being associated with the attacks, with Iranian support and Syrian acquiescence."

If the U.S. reaches a firm conclusion that Mr. Moussavi and his supporters are the culprits, it will face an agonizing decision about whether to retaliate. President Reagan warned in a televised speech last week: "Those who directed this atrocity must be dealt justice, and they will be."

STAT The Reagan administration this week remains committed to retaliation. But some policy makers question such tactics, suggesting that they could open the U.S. Marines to further terrorist acts and also complicate a solution to the Lebanon crisis.

The simplest retaliatory operation would be an attack against the headquarters of Mr. Moussavi's "Islamic Amal" faction in Baalbek, in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Some U.S. officials favor a commando raid against the headquarters, while others argue for an air strike. Officials suggest that the U.S. could hit the living quarters of Mr. Moussavi's group, in addition to their command center.



Hussein Moussavi

The Baalbek option has problems. A commando attack would require moving into territory controlled by Syrian troops. An air strike would risk hurting bystanders in a crowded urban area, one U.S. official notes. Moreover, an air strike could be dangerous for the U.S., since attacking planes would probably be vulnerable to Syria's extensive air-defense system, which is partly manned by Soviet troops. Finally, it isn't even certain that those responsible for last month's terrorist attacks have remained in the Baalbek area.

The Reagan administration also is considering diplomatic reprisals. For example, the U.S. may urge Lebanon to close the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, which

American officials believe was a meeting place for the terrorists. The U.S. might consider sanctions against Syria as well. But even these relatively mild diplomatic measures are blocked now by the Lebanese "national reconciliation" discussions in Geneva, Switzerland. The U.S. doesn't want to disrupt those talks, which offer the best hope for stabilizing Lebanon and getting American troops out.

An alternative to retaliation is negotiation of a security agreement with Syria that would protect American troops in Lebanon. The U.S. adopted this approach with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s, and it helped stop attacks against Americans in Beirut. The U.S. and Syria talked last week in Damascus about security problems, but there isn't any sign that Syria is ready to offer any solid cooperation.

Syria's role in the Lebanon crisis is crucial because it has the power to encourage—or forestall—terrorist raids. U.S. and Lebanese officials argue, for example, that it would have been difficult for Mr. Moussavi's Shiite group to gather and transport the explosives that killed at least 234 American and 56 French troops without the connivance of the Syrian armed forces and intelligence network in Lebanon.

"It's naive to imagine that anything happens (in Syrian-controlled parts of Lebanon) without the Syrians," explains a Lebanese source. Adds Richard Helms, a one-time ambassador to Iran and Central Intelligence Agency director, "You don't get trucks and 2,000 pounds of dynamite from the local drugstore."

Syria, Iran and Mr. Moussavi have all denied responsibility for the bombings. But all three have gloated about the carnage.

Gathering Clues

In its investigation, the U.S. is drawing on a range of sources. The U.S. has covert contacts in some Lebanese factions; these are supplemented by the much broader network of the Lebanese Deuxieme Bureau, the intelligence unit of the Lebanese army. The U.S. can also study intelligence reports from friendly countries, such as

France, Britain, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In addition to these human sources, the U.S. has various forms of technical surveillance. The array of information is being analyzed now in a final "all sources" intelligence effort.

The case against Mr. Moussavi and his pro-Iranian supporters isn't yet conclusive, partly because of the difficulty in gathering reliable information in Lebanon. U.S. officials cite three sorts of evidence:

—Analysis of the method of operation. The fact that the attacks were suicide missions suggests that the drivers of the bomb-laden trucks were extremist Shiite Moslems, who believe that by dying in a holy cause they will gain a place in heaven. The fact that French troops were hit—at a time when Iran is furious at France for selling sophisticated jets to Iraq—suggests that the attackers were

pro-Iranian. Thus, suspicion immediately falls on Mr. Moussavi, the most extreme pro-Iranian Shiite leader in Lebanon.

—Surveillance. At about 6:32 on the morning of the attacks, roughly 10 minutes after the bombs exploded, a group of men was seen leaving the Iranian embassy in Beirut and driving off at high speed. Their flight indicates that the Iranian embassy may have known about or helped coordinate the bombings. U.S. officials also suspect that the Iranian embassy may have been a contact point for Mr. Moussavi's followers in Beirut.

—Agents' reports. In recent weeks, U.S. intelligence had picked up rumors that there would be a "spectacular attack" by pro-Iranian Shiites against "the godless Americans and French." Last week, as the U.S. and its friends pumped for information, intelligence contacts in Lebanon repeatedly named Mr. Moussavi as the man behind the attacks. "People who are sources of various intelligence services are saying that Moussavi did it," says one official.

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